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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes language development in the classroom as fostering the development of students who are community builders, problem solvers and critical thinkers. Examples of both positive and negative classroom situations are used to illustrate these three language domains. Successful classrooms are safe communities where children are willing to take risks and offer opinions, where they respect their peers and the teacher and, in return, are equally respected. Teachers play a pivotal role in developing that sense of community, but often fail to do so based on their own personal classroom experiences. As a result, the teacher-centered mode dominates where language is used mostly to control and regulate student behavior. This "silencing" of students is analyzed through Michelle Fine's work in New York City public schools and other related research. A reality based curriculum with real life problems for students to resolve with opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills is suggested. (EH)

The Language of a Classroom Democracy

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The Language of a Classroom Democracy

Author Randall Jarrell tells the story about a bat poet who was captivated by the beauty that surrounded him. Especially, he loved the mockingbird's song--so much so that he tried singing a song just like it. But he soon discovered he couldn't make a tune. Happily though, he discovered that he could put words together in such a way as to describe the beauty of the mockingbird's song. He was pleased with his poem. When he tried to share it with the other bats, they didn't recognize the magic in his words. So, the bat thought perhaps the mockingbird himself might appreciate his poem more than the bats. Eventually the bat persuaded the mockingbird to listen. When the bat had finished his poem the mockingbird said he liked the poem and complimented the bat poet on his technical merit. The bat poet returned home somewhat disappointed. While he felt good that the mockingbird had liked his poem; he also felt bad that the mockingbird had seemingly missed the more meaningful points. "I might as well have said it to the bats," he muttered. Later, as he hung on the porch upside down, he thought bitterly to himself, "The trouble isn't making poems, the trouble's finding somebody that will listen to them."

The bat poet wanted to find someone who would listen to his poem and recognize the essence of what he was trying to represent in words. I think most of us have the same desires when we share our thoughts. We hope for a response that focuses on the content of our words, not the surface features. Anything less leaves us unsatisfied. The same is true for children in schools--the focus of a teacher's response to her students should center on what is being said, rather than how it is said.

"When one has something important to say and other people are interested in hearing it"--These, writes Gordon Wells, are the conditions that foster language development (p.107). Like the Bat Poet, children both enjoy and benefit from have someone hear and respond to their poems-- their stories, concerns and questions. We know classrooms should be democratic communities where children's voices are listened to, taken seriously, and responded to. It is in these classrooms that children can use language to build and shape their world--they become community builders, problem solvers and critical thinkers. I'm going to share examples of both positive and negative classroom situations that illustrate these three language domains.

Language and Community Building

Successful classrooms are safe communities where children are willing to take risks and offer opinions, where they respect their peers and the teacher, and in return are equally respected. Teachers have an important role in guiding children to use language to establish these communities. But often, as teachers, we rely on our own past experiences and resulting teacher schemas to shape how we interact with students. Those who were never given opportunities in their own elementary years to help construct classroom democracies rely in part on past experiences to shape teaching behaviors. For those teachers who haven't looked critically at their own histories and have never had the opportunity to see how alternative classroom language structures function, it is easy to fall into the traditional teacher mode, using language mostly to control and regulate student behaviors. In these classrooms students are expected to mold their language to conform with teacher expectations. And when this happens, children are silenced.

Michelle Fine tried to discover why the drop-out rate in one of NYC's comprehensive schools was an astronomical 87%. Fine discovered that in many cases, it was the instructional practices used by teachers that silenced the students. Here's an example of how this can happen. This excerpt is from a transcript taken in Ms. Parnell's remedial reading class (Fine, 1991, p. 60-61). Students are filling in a practice exam.

[ON BOARD] 10 [instructional objective]: Students will take pre-test. Learn to write business letter.

David (in class of thirteen): What's the date?

Teacher: What's the proper procedure to ask that question?

Steve: Raise hand.

David (now raising hand): What's the date?

Teacher: What's your name, first?

David: David.

Teacher: David, please take off your hat.

Paul: What is the date?

Alice: 6th.

Teacher: How would I write it?

Onyx: February.
Sholene: Capital.
Teacher: How would I know that? I only know what you say.
Gina: Is the guidance counselor same as the grade advisor?
Teacher: I am not answering questions asked that way. Tanya?
Tanya: [Repeats other student's question.]
Teacher: Can anyone answer?
Two students: Yes.
Sam: No.
Teacher: Think about it, and don't feel stupid about asking questions.
Sam: I don't feel stupid.
Teacher: Any other questions?
Dino: Why are we doing this?
Teacher: Don't tell me your name. I hope you learn to have more respect.

Michelle Fine comments that Ms. Parnell's classroom community suffers from the air of silencing--classroom interactions are characterized by sarcasm, humiliation and competition. In this particular case the teacher had rigid rules and expectations governing student talk and behavior. She tried to maintain her authority status by insisting her students comply with classroom speaking structures. Typically, these structures underlie classroom interaction and are subtle and implicit. Those students who can't play by the rules are kept out of classroom dialog (Mehan, 1979).

Contrast Ms. Parnell's interactions with her students to Janet Allen's (1994). During one of the first days of school, Janet helped her ninth-grade remedial reading students develop their own classroom rules. She asked them to think about past experiences in school--both good and bad--and write about them in their journals. When they were finished, Janet had everyone in the class say at least one thing about their past experiences. It was important for her to hear from every student. Some examples are:

"I hate school"

"The only thing I DO like about school is that you can see your friends. I DON'T like homework, teachers (most of them), and classes are usually BORING"

"The best thing about school is getting out. The worst is homework."

From their comments she made a list of collective experiences.

"OK," Janet said, "we have this great list. Now let's look at the list and let each person write three words in their journals that could have something to do with classroom rules." After contributing and discussing rules-related words produced through journal writing, the students chose "homework," "boring" and "hollering" as the most significant. Based on the three most significant words, these are the rules Janet's class wrote:

1. HOMEWORK--We will do homework two days a week. We will choose the days. The homework must be something that is "halfway interesting."

2. BORING--Work in class should not be boring. We need to tell you (Janet) if we are bored. What's boring for somebody, might be interesting for somebody else, so we will give everything and everyone a chance. We will all try not to be bored.

3. HOLLERING--The teacher won't holler at us. We won't holler at each other (or the teacher). We won't do things that would make someone want to holler at us (we know what those things are).

There are basic differences between these classroom communities that are played out in the classroom language interactions. In Ms. Parnell's class students' language was controlled by the teacher. Students were invited to respond to the teacher's requests for information, but any unsolicited contributions were cut down. Janet's assumed a facilitator's role in her language interactions with her students. She prompted them to articulate their stories and concerns about school and then listened to their comments. She made sure everyone's voice was heard. Then Janet helped her students use their experiences as a basis for creating standards for community behavior. The class wrote meaningful rules based on previous school experiences. Janet guided her students through a process that satisfies Wells' conditions for language development: Her students had something important to say and she was interested in hearing it.

Language and Problem Solving

Next, democratic communities need members who are willing and able to be problem solvers. If school is to be a place where children learn and develop, they need real opportunities to work through genuine predicaments. In traditional teacher-directed classrooms, the teacher is usually the solver of routine problems that arise. Children are typically asked to solve artificial problems that stem from a written curriculum. But when the curriculum is based on children's issues, real-life problems become the focus of community concern. And life's real problems are confounded by complicated circumstances that are all relative to the individuals involved. With a reality-based curriculum teachers need to be listeners, helping children use their voices to identify real life issues and find workable solutions. They must also be flexible, able to build in discussion time when the need arises. As they solve problems together, children learn personal and community responsibility. They have opportunities to use their own experiences to sort out problems while they also benefit by learning from others.

The following transcript comes from Vivian Paley's book, *Wally's Stories.* Children in this classroom are trying to figure out how they will move a 75 pound bag of sand across the room. As you read through the transcript, think about the teacher's role in the discussion. How does she prompt and guide her student's thinking? Also, think about the role her student's have in solving the problem.

Wally: Too bad Superman isn't here.
Teacher: Well, since Superman isn't here, what shall we do?
Eddie: I can do it easy.
(He pulls on the handles of the basket and moves it about an inch. Everyone who wishes is given a chance to move the sand, and each child has great difficulty, all the while insisting it is easy.)
Lisa: Do it with a rope. I can do it easy if you tie a rope to my arm.
(She ties a rope to the basket an strained as she pulls on it, but the basket does not move.)
Lisa: This is hard. The rope is too heavy.

Rose: Use a string.
Teacher: Here's some string, Rose. Try it.
Rose: I can't tie.
(Paley ties on the string and the moment she pulls it the string snaps.)
Wally: I knew that would happen.
Rose: How did you know, Wally?
Wally: Real workers never use string.
Kenny: Let the whole class pull.
Teacher: That's too crowded. Try four children. Kenny, Rose, Ellen, Fred--you try.
(They pull and push in all directions and the basket moves slightly.)
Rose: You made a scratch.
Ellen: Oh-oh! We're scratching up the floor.
Teacher: Then we must think of another way.
Eddie: Get a lifter to lift it up. Then wheel it up.
(The children begin to visualize a pulley. They lack the vocabulary to describe the machine they are about to invent. It is obvious that they have seen a pulley in operation, and they know it can solve their problem but they falter and grope for the right words.)
Andy: Take a basket, a round fence, put the basket in there. Put it around a metal fence and lift it up or down. See, you have to pull it down.
Deanna: I think I know what Andy means. He means that there's a rope on. Put the rope on something metal and then pull the rope down so the rope goes down and the basket goes up.
Andy: That wasn't what I mean. Get two ropes. Pull it up and the rope goes up. Pull it down and the rope goes down.
Wally: Take a big crane and hook it up there on the ceiling and let the crane take it over to the other side. A person sits inside the crane and controls it.
Teacher: How could we get a crane into the room?
Wally: Okay, just hook the crane to the ceiling--not the whole crane.
Lisa: I didn't tie the rope to my arm. I forgot to do that.
Earl: Not to your arm. Tie it to the table and pull the table.
Eddie: No, look. Tie the rope on to a wheel and if we turn the wheel it would go that way, to the other part of the room.
Teacher: Eddie still likes his idea of a rope going around a wheel.
Eddie: I like Wally's idea too, but I like mine better. Get a rope, put a hook on the wall. Then tie the rope to it. Then pull it up on the thing that moves packages.

Warren: I've got a wheel in the country. I can bring it. I'll ask my mother.
Earl: Wait. Put two wheels together--wind them up and pull it sideways.
Kim: Put it in the wagon.

(Later the children explain their problem to the science teacher and get some help. He tells them they've invented a useful machine called a pulley. He comes to class with a lightweight pulley and helps the children move the sand up on the wagon.)

Vivian Paley gives her students a chance to discover the nature of the sand bag problem themselves. Each of the children has a chance to physically test the limits of the situation. Paley listens to everything the children say and responds to the content of their words. She has an important role in the discussion. Each time she speaks her comments serve to clarify confusion or offer suggestions--she never redirects the discussion according to her own motives. The children in this example were faced with a real-life challenge and had the opportunity to collaboratively work through the situation, eventually solving their own problem.

Language and Critical Thinking

Democratic communities also need critical thinkers. Political philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote that the freedom to have and express opinion is necessary to the mental well-being of mankind--for there is no other way to discover truth. And it is the same with children. Unless they are allowed to express their opinions and to question others, they have few opportunities to effectively develop their ideas. Children need opportunities to question inconsistencies and settle their own cognitive conflict. This is how children come to define their own sense of right and wrong and how they begin to make sense of the world.

In the next transcript, adolescents in a NYC classroom are learning about the concept of Equal Opportunity Employment (Fine, 1991, p.36). The teacher's aim is to transfer information to her students. When one student brings up a concern, it is dismissed.

White teacher: What's EOE?

African-American male student 1: Equal over time.

White teacher: Not quite. Anyone else?

African-American female students: Equal Opportunity Employer.

White Teacher: That's right

African-American male student 2: What does that mean?

White Teacher: That means that an employer can't discriminate on the basis of sex, age, marital status or race.

African-American male student 2: But wait, sometimes white people only hire white people.

White Teacher: No, they're not supposed to if they say EOE in their ads. Now take out your homework.

LATER THAT DAY:'

MF to teacher: Why don't you discuss racism in your class?

Teacher: It would demoralize the students, theyneed to feel positive and optimistic--like they have a chance. Racism is just an excuse they use to not try harder.

This excerpt illustrates how the teacher manipulates the course of discussion. The African-American male student 2 was drawing on his own experience to contradict some seemingly apparent inconsistency between what equal opportunity employers are supposed to do and what really happens in his world. From the start, the teacher had a specific expectation for where the discussion would lead. When conflict was brought up, the teacher dismissed it without allowing or encouraging the students to further explore .the issue. The student's concern, which was based on real life experience, was not considered legitimate by the teacher. If teachers are to help students develop their language and critical thinking abilities, valid concerns such as these should not be so easily dismissed.

Here is another more subtle example of a similar phenomenon (Wells, p.88). In this case the teacher is responding to a child who is showing a seed he has found. In this case, it seems the teacher is aware of a learning opportunity. She elicits information from the child about what he has found. But, unlike in previous examples where teachers draw out students' responses and build on their contributions to the discussion, this teacher asks questions in order to obtain specific answers. When she doesn't get the answer she expects, she pushes for the correct response.

Lee: I want to show you! Isn't it big?

Teacher: It is big, isn't it? What is it?

Lee: A conker.

Teacher: Yes.

Lee: Then that'll need opening up.

Teacher: It needs opening up. What does it need opening up for?

Lee: 'Cos the seed's inside.

Teacher: Yes, very good. What will the seed grow into?

Lee: A conker.

Teacher: No, it won't grow into a conker. It'll grow into a sort of tree, won't it? Can you remember the--

Lee: Horse chestnut.

Teacher: Horse chestnut--good. Put your conker on the nature table, then.

In contrast, the next excerpt from Pat McLure's first grade classroom illustrates how a teacher can elicit responses from children in order to help them develop further understandings (Miller, 1988). Pat's role is to draw out the children's comments. If ever she disputes a child's explanation it is to clarify an obvious confusion. But what is important about this excerpt is the fact that the children have extensive opportunities to offer their understandings and opinions and, with Pat's guidance, they have a chance to develop them.

Tape Transcript of Writing Share (11/9/87)

Pat: For the first working time this morning, I'd like people to concentrate on Rotten jack, so they can finish up their books.
Children: Yuk!
Pat: What has happened to him? Ming?
Ming: He got rotted and he gotted smushy.
Pat: Alright, he got smushy. Joshua.
Joshua: He, he's dead.
[laughter]
Eugene: I think it looks like he got a little too much soft on the inside.
Pat: Um-hm. He did get very soft on the inside. Megan?
Megan: I think he just...died.
Pat: You think he just died. Brad?
Brad: I think somebody shot him.
[laughter]
Pat: Why do you think that? I don't think anybody touched him at all. Susan?
Susan: I think he falled down.
TJ: Like he melted. He melted into pieces.
Pat: No, he didn't melt.
Megan: Did you take him apart?
Pat: No, I
Susan: He felled apart.
Pat: He fell.
Paul: He fell on the floor and you had to pick him up.
Pat: That's right. What made him fall? Linda? Why did he fall down?
Linda: I think he got sorta smushy on the bottom and he he sorta fell down.
Pat: He got soft and smushy? Gwen?
Gwen: Because he's so rotten?
Pat: Because he's so rotten? That's right. He got softer and softer.
Sarah: Because the sides got really soft and squishy and they just went pfft like that.
Pat: When he was new, his sides were hard and he was strong.
child: Yeah, he was
Pat: And he got older and rotten, and his sides went soft.
children: Yeah, now, right

Pat: He wasn't strong enough to stand up.
Gwen: It's like, What happened to Rotten Jack? Because he's all gone.
Pat: He disappeared, um-hmmm.
[children all talking at once]
Pat: We need to have people listen.
Nick: I think the top got all squishy and stuff and he collapsed.
Pat: He did collapse. That's true. It was hard to tell. When I came in this morning and it was on the ground, it was hard to tell what had happened to the top. The stem had broken off from the top.
child: oh-oh
Pat: But it was hard to see whether the top fell inside of him or beside. I tried to pick it up and put it in the bucket just about the way it was on the floor. Not exactly, but close to it. Jimmy?
Jimmy: I think he tripped over hisself.
[laughter]
Paul: He tripped over his what?
children: self
Pat: We need to think very carefully about this being true information. Just what we've seen. Joshua?
Joshua: I think someone came in here at night and threw him across the room.
[laughter]
Pat: It didn't happen, because it was right there.
Paul: It was falling [mumble]
Pat: Claudia?
Claudia: um...I tink I know why the pumpkin fell down.
Pat: Why did the pumpkin fall down?
Claudia: Because
Nick: It's rotten
Claudia: Because, um, all brown, all brown and black and white.
Pat: That's right. And all of that made it very soft.
Claudia: And then it fall down.
Pat: And then it fell down. Paul?
Paul: Um, I think maybe the top fell in there and then it jiggled it so it fell down. And it's just so uh loose it just fell apart or maybe , it was the stem that was a little heavy and the top was so heavy and the sides were so uh soft that it pushed it down, it was so heavy. It just pushed it, it just pushed it down sideways, and also it looks like it's leaking. It's all wet right there.
Pat: That's because I had to wash the carpet.
Claudia: Why?

Pat: Because it made a mess on the carpet.
Paul: And then it will be all yellow and sticky.
Claudia: Not yellow!
Paul: Yes it would.
Linda: It's wiggle-ly. Like my teeth.
Pat: It's wiggly. Um-hm, you know about that. Claudia?
Claudia: I tink, I tink the pumpkin fall down all by itself because he because the soft stuff move.
Pat: Um-hm. Okay, just two more. Megan?
Megan: Um, I think I agree with what Paul said. The top fell in, but the sides were so loose, that it was kind of big for the sides and it went way down to the bottom and the bottom...
child: How could it fall down if it was the same size?
Claudia: I don't know.
TJ: Cause it shrinked.
Graham: Because it was all squishy.
Megan: It was really squishy at the bottom and then the top fell down here and it was squishy down a little bit because the top was kind of stronger than the sides, and then it pushed it down so far that it just falled off.
Pat: Eugene?
Eugene: I I I think that Paul's theory that the top fell in, except first I think it might have fellen apart and then fell down.
Pat: You think it might have fallen apart, and then falled down?
Eugene: Yeah.
Claudia: I think that somebody blow...
Pat: Brad, would you get the little basket off the shelf of the booklets? Can you call names to give them to people?

This excerpt illustrates how the teacher can encourage children's responses. This isn't to say that anything goes. Pat holds her students accountable to the truth (Miller, 1988). Also, the discussion ends without a concrete conclusion as to what happened to Rotten Jack. Pat herself demonstrates to the children that in some cases there are no certain answers, and ambiguity must be accepted. Though in this case the children finish the discussion without being able to conclude what exactly happened to Jack, their understanding is probably clearer than it was in the beginning.

Conclusion

In these examples I have attempted to reveal how language can help children become active participants in democratic classroom communities, how they can be helped to use language to solve problems and to become critical thinkers.

There is no more appropriate way to conclude this talk than to borrow the words of Gordon Wells who comments so eloquently on the need for all people, but especially children, to have opportunities to construct and share their own meanings. He writes, "To try to make sense, to construct stories, and to share them with others in speech and in writing is an essential part of being human. For those of us who are more knowledgeable and more mature--parents and teachers--the responsibility is clear: to interact with those in our care in such a way as to foster and enrich their meaning making. (p.222)

After English Class

I used to like "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening."
I liked the coming darkness,
The jingle of harness bells, breaking--and adding
--to the stillness,
The gentle drift of snow. . . .

But today, the teacher told us what everything stood for.
The woods, the horse, the miles to go, the sleep--
They all have "hidden meanings."

It's grown so complicated now that,
Next time I drive by,
I don't think I'll bother to stop.

By: Jean Little, *Hey World, Here I Am!*

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